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RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 1154
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 6837
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 5765
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 000439

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: DEMONSTRATIONS CONTINUE IN PUNJAB

REF: A. ISLAMABAD 429

[¶](#)B. LAHORE 35

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Gerald Feierstein for reasons 1.4 (b),
(d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, mostly in Punjab, after Friday prayers to protest the disqualification of opposition Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leaders Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif. Protests turned violent in Lahore and Rawalpindi, and police used tear gas and batons to disperse crowds; approximately 300 PML-N protesters were charged with vandalism resulting from yesterday's protests. PM Gilani chaired a cabinet meeting to formally bless President Zardari's decision to impose "governor's rule" (appointing PPP Governor Taseer as Chief Executive) in Punjab for two months. Under pressure from PML-N, Gilani also called the National Assembly into session February 28. It appears that the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has no particular game plan for this session; PML-N does not have the votes to bring down the government in a no-confidence vote, but we suspect it will come to the session well-organized for a bruising assault on Zardari. Gilani said publicly that the Sharifs' disqualification "weakened democracy" and made it clear in a February 27 meeting with Charge that he supported reconciliation efforts between the PPP and Nawaz. Several of Zardari's coalition partners again offered to mediate, but neither side is ready yet to back down. We expect demonstrations to continue throughout the weekend; on February 27, the Mission issued a warden notice warning Americans to avoid demonstrations and crowds. End Summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) wasted no time in "de-notifying" Shahbaz of his winning a Punjab Provincial Assembly seat, thereby making the seat vacant. The ECP also allowed the contest to resume for a National Assembly seat from Lahore left open for Nawaz.

Demonstrations

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[¶](#)3. (SBU) As expected, thousands gathered after Friday prayers throughout Punjab to protest the disqualification from office of opposition Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leaders Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif. The biggest crowds were in Lahore, which saw 10,000 protesters, with 7,500 demonstrators each protesting in Rawalpindi, Faisalabad and the PM's home town of Multan. Credible reports are that khateeb (Islamic preachers) denounced the Sharif disqualification in their Friday sermons in the main mosques in Lahore, Rawalpindi,

Faisalabad, Multan, and Bahawalpur, and encouraged peaceful public demonstrations against the decision.

¶4. (SBU) Nawaz and Shahbaz, speaking separately in Lahore, indicted the Supreme Court justices as being "bootlickers" of those in uniform and linked Zardari with Musharraf, while invoking the name of Zardari's late wife, martyred Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto. Police batoned the throngs trying to flood the area. The PML-N parliamentary delegation remained on the steps of the Provincial Assembly, and the Speaker on several occasions repeated to the assembled crowd Nawaz's admonition for the bureaucracy and the police to ignore Governor Taseer's orders and support the "constitutional" government of Shahbaz.

¶5. (SBU) The Punjab police confirmed that Rangers were deployed yesterday in Rawalpindi and that the Governor has placed them on stand-by in other urban centers (Lahore, Multan, Bahawalpur, Faisalabad, and Gujranwala) in case demonstrations turn violent. Police leave has been canceled in the province as demonstrations are expected throughout the weekend. The provincial government has filed first incident reports against 300 PML-N activists from Rawalpindi, including, we understand, at least one parliamentarian, for taking part in vandalism during yesterday's demonstrations in that city. Private businesses in the province reportedly opened briefly this morning in some locations despite a call for a second day of strikes, but most had closed by midday. Traders have not yet issued a formal call for strikes on Saturday or Sunday. Press and Post contacts report that the strikes have triggered gas shortages locally and further

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complicated area transportation.

¶6. (SBU) In the capital, the road between Islamabad and the international airport in Rawalpindi was shut down for most of the day by protesters; other major intersections in the twin cities were also closed by demonstrations. By sunset, police resorted to teargas and baton charges to disperse the crowds.

Only small groups formed in Pakistan's other three provinces; however, CG Karachi noted reports of a scuffle with police in Nawabshah, Sindh, an historical PPP stronghold and the district represented by President Asif Zardari's sister Azra Pechuhoh. In Peshawar, there were a few relatively small demonstrations and reports of some violence at Peshawar University; police mobilized to keep protesters from closing the Peshawar-Islamabad highway.

The Battle in Parliament

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¶7. (C) Meanwhile, all parties maneuvered to gain political momentum. PM Gilani told Charge February 27 that a cabinet meeting he called formally blessed the decision to impose "governor's rule" in Punjab for two months. He also said he had called for an immediate session February 28 of the National Assembly to bring the debate from the streets "inside" and allow all sides to air their concerns. In fact, Gilani was responding to accusations by National Assembly Opposition Leader Chaudhry Nisar that governor's rule was illegal without cabinet approval; Nisar called publicly for a National Assembly session.

¶8. (C) When asked what the PPP had planned for the National Assembly session, Gilani indicated there were no plans to introduce any PPP motions to address the Sharifs' legal situation or the ongoing controversy over the deposed judiciary. He said Nawaz already had rejected the idea of amending the National Reconciliation Ordinance to grant him amnesty from Musharraf-era charges. (Note: PLM-N's plans are not clear at this point; the party does not have the votes to bring down the government through a no-confidence vote, but it could embarrass the government by tabling a resolution condemning the Court's decision or attacking Zardari on the floor.)

¶9. (C) Gilani told Charge he had made it a point February 27 to declare publicly, just before the PPP's Central Executive Committee meeting chaired by President Zardari, that the Sharifs' disqualification "weakened democracy." Gilani said he had indeed talked with Shahbaz on February 25 in an effort to reconcile the PPP and the PML-N in the Punjab and had called Shahbaz to express his dismay after the "surprise" verdict. He made clear that he had purposefully remained disengaged from discussions within the government on the Sharifs' disqualification because he disagreed with the tactic. Separately, both Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) leader Fazlur Rehman and Awami National Party (ANP) leader Asfandyar Wali Khan offered to mediate the dispute between PPP and the PML-N.

¶10. (C) Gilani dismissed reports of large protests in his home town of Multan, saying that the TV cameras always exaggerate the size of crowds. The ability of Nawaz to continue demonstrations, said Gilani, would depend largely on the Punjab government reaction. The joint rule of PPP and the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) would keep the lid on Karachi; no one in Balochistan was paying any attention to this issue; and people in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) had their own worries.

¶11. (C) PPP Commerce Minister Amin Faheem (brought back into the PPP fold after Zardari rejected him for PM) said publicly that the imposition of governor's rule in Punjab was a constitutional requirement; PPP Information Minister Sherry Rehman characterized Nawaz's February 27 Sheikhupura speech an "invitation to mutiny." The PPP reportedly cajoled another PML-N MNA to announce his switch to the PPP bench.

PML Kingmaker in Wait and See Mode

¶12. (C) The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) is now kingmaker in the Punjab Assembly, where a new chief minister will be

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selected in two months (unless governor's rule is extended). PML President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain told PolCouns February 27 that his party would remain on the fence for now. PML would not offer a candidate for the Punjab chief minister job and had not decided whether to support a PPP or a PML-N candidate. According to Shujaat, Nawaz's ability to sustain street protests would depend on how PPP Governor/Chief Executive responded to demonstrators. Shujaat also suggested that much will depend on the Army. If the military wants a way to return to power, they could urge the PPP government to crack down on demonstrators, requiring that the Army be called in. Shujaat admitted that he had not talked to the military about their wishes, but he expected to discuss this issue with Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Kayani and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Director General Pasha when they paid condolence calls on Shujaat this weekend.

¶13. (C) In Lahore, the PML-N made a show of meeting provincial parliamentarians (MPAs) from the PML, but Shujaat said any MPA who attempted to switch votes would be kicked out of the party under parliamentary rules. PML member Marvi Menom revealed the party was trying to negotiate with the PPP for a couple more Senate seats in Balochistan.

¶14. (C) Comment: The PPP is making every effort to show that Zardari's decision to declare governor's rule in Punjab was legal, although clearly this move has been taken as a call to arms by the PML-N. Neither the PPP nor the PML-N are in any mood to negotiate, but it is still early days in this saga. The fact that neither can form a majority government in Punjab will force some accommodation with each other, or with the PML. Tomorrow's National Assembly session will be volatile, but the fact that the parties will debate within the system is a good sign. Less welcome are increasingly violent reaction by police to demonstrators; the PPP needs to

be careful not to fall into Nawaz's trap of trying to provoke violence that will bring out the Army. End comment.

FEIERSTEIN